Repairing Black Girls' Relationship with School

An Evaluation of the EMERGE Program for System-Impacted Girls

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Dr. Sydney McKinney
Aishatu Yusuf, MPA

National Black Women's Justice Institute

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Executive Summary

Research confirms that schools have protective effects on students. Although the factors that contribute to school bonds and attachment are well-documented, many schools, especially schools serving predominantly Black youth and other youth of color, struggle to cultivate environments that support students' growth and development. For students of color, schools are sites where their physical, psychological, and emotional safety and wellbeing are under constant assault. This is particularly true for Black students, especially Black girls. Consequently, Black girls—specifically those who are directly impacted by the juvenile legal system and foster care—are at heightened risk of disengaging from and being pushed out of school.

The EMERGE Program operates from the belief that preparing Black girls who have been involved in the juvenile-legal or foster care systems for educational and employment success requires also addressing their mental and emotional wellbeing. EMERGE's program model integrates educational assistance and accelerated credit accrual with intensive mental wellness and crisis intervention services to create a learning environment organized around its students' specialized and complex needs. These elements work together to repair students' connections with learning and academic achievement.

This process evaluation seeks to describe and understand EMERGE's services, activities, policies, and procedures, as well as factors that affected its implementation and evolution during its pilot phase. Key findings include:

- **EMERGE successfully implemented strategies to repair Black girls' bonds with school and restore a commitment to their educational success:**
  - **Assessed for trauma exposure:** Using the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) questionnaire, EMERGE staff assessed students' trauma exposure to better understand students' needs and experiences and to create a school environment that supports students' wellness and educational goals.
  - **Instituted a community-centered staffing model:** EMERGE hired staff who were from the same communities as EMERGE students and collaborated with organizations with a deep understanding of the lived experiences of the youth EMERGE serves, which was vital to students' sense of safety and comfort in the program.
  - **Fostered a culturally affirming learning environment:** Educators presented culturally affirming lessons and displayed images and quotes from Black women leaders throughout history to inspire students and help them cultivate a sense of self-determination and leadership and visualize new possibilities and opportunities.

- **Co-created school policies and procedures with students:** EMERGE implemented restorative practices to promote a sense of community and collective responsibility, and the program engaged students in the development of policies and procedures to ensure they were youth-centered and regenerative instead of punitive.

- **EMERGE implemented promising strategies to build pathways to college and employment for system-impacted Black girls that were hampered by external forces:**

  - **Student-centered educational plans:** EMERGE implemented an individualized course of study through the Alameda County Office of Education (ACOE) that allowed students to accrue missing course credits and graduate at their own pace, often faster than possible in a traditional public school. However, there was some concern that the individualized course of study prescribed by the ACOE did not engender an enthusiasm for learning or an interest to pursue higher education.

  - **Creating EMERGE-specific lessons:** To deepen students' curiosity and interest in learning, EMERGE instructors created lessons to supplement the individualized education plans for each student. Despite interest, student attendance was sporadic, given that completion of supplemental lessons was not required for graduation.

  - **Partnering with a local community college:** At the start, EMERGE established a relationship with Laney College to help facilitate student matriculation into the college's associate degree and certificate programs. Few EMERGE students matriculated at Laney College, likely because the partnership ceased after the first year of implementation due to factors outside EMERGE's control.

Although, EMERGE looks and operates differently today than originally planned, it has successfully graduated girls with high school diplomas every year since its launch. Due largely to external factors, program staffing is different, as well as the make-up of its program partners. Despite the challenges EMERGE faced during its pilot phase, the cornerstone of the approach remained steadfast and helped to repair system-impacted Black girls' commitment to learning and their education goals. By creating an environment where students knew the staff were wholly invested in their wellbeing and would accept them no matter the circumstance or behavior they exhibited, EMERGE helped revitalize students' commitment to their education and confidence in themselves and what they could achieve. Because of this approach, EMERGE should be viewed not just as a school, but also as a critical support system for Black girls and other girls of color who have been impacted by the juvenile-legal or foster care systems. The EMERGE program offers insightful guidance and promising strategies for how to rebuild and repair students' bonds and attachment to school, especially for Black girls and other girls of color who are directly impacted by the juvenile-legal or foster care systems.

Introduction

The EMERGE (Educating, Mentoring, Empowering, and Reaffirming our Girls for Excellence) Reentry Program, is a pilot educational program for Black girls and other girls of color in Alameda County, CA, ages 16 to 18 years old who are returning to school from a period of confinement in youth detention. The program also targets girls in foster care, many of whom are also directly impacted by the juvenile legal system or at high risk of involvement in that system.[a] Black girls in both populations graduate from high school at much lower rates than their peers, in part because they are at such high risk of being pushed out of and disengaging from school.[b] The long-term impact of disengaging from schools are significant: it limits students' chances of graduating from high school, going on to college, securing employment, and establishing successful careers. EMERGE was created and designed to build pathways to college and careers for Black girls and other girls of color who have been directly impacted by the juvenile-legal or foster care systems.

EMERGE launched in February 2016 with the following goals:

- Repair the relationship that Black girls and other girls of color who have been involved in the juvenile-legal or foster care systems have with school,

- Assist students with recovering and accumulating school credits toward completion of a high school diploma, and

- Facilitate girls' enrollment in institutions of higher learning and career-bound employment.

The program is unique at every level. Although there are educational programs for disconnected youth and afterschool programs for system-impacted young people, EMERGE is the only school to our knowledge that is explicitly and intentionally designed to rebuild and repair the relationships and attachment that system-impacted Black girls and other girls of color have with school.[c] As such, EMERGE is a new prom-

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a   Hereafter, we use "foster care system" to generally refer to the child welfare system, including foster care.
b   "Youth involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems—commonly referred to as crossover, dually-involved, dually-adjudicated, dual-system, or multi-system youth—require a special level of focus. Crossover youth require attention because their involvement in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems is associated with higher risks for: mental health, educational, and vocational challenges; higher rates of recidivism; longer stays in detention; and poorer placement stability and permanency outcomes," see Casey Family Programs, "Is there an effective practice model for serving crossover youth?" May 29, 2018, https://www.casey.org/crossover-youth-resource-list/.
c   Here and throughout this report, the term "system-impacted girls" refers to girls who have been directly impacted by the juvenile-legal and/or child welfare systems, including placement in foster care and youth detention.

ising model and educational approach for putting system-impacted youth on a path toward safety, stability, wellbeing, and success that should inform future strategies and practices for re-engaging Black girls and other girls of color who have been impacted by youth detention or the foster care system—and all youth at risk of disconnection.

Why Was EMERGE Created?

Research confirms that schools have protective effects on students. Students with stronger ties to school report better academic performance, including higher GPAs and greater likelihood of graduation.[1] These students also report better mental health, including lower frequency of suicidal ideation, lower rates of substance use, and lower risk of engaging in delinquency.[2] For these reasons, school connection and academic achievement are increasingly considered social determinants of health and wellbeing.

Despite the evidence of the positive impact of school participation, these benefits are not equally distributed across all students. For students of color, schools are sites where their physical, psychological, and emotional safety and wellbeing are under constant assault. This is particularly true for Black students, especially Black girls. Compared to their classmates, Black students tend to rate school climate lower than their peers. Even within the same schools, Black students perceived their schools were less caring and more unequal than their white peers.[3] Reasons for lower ratings include:

Goals of EMERGE

1 Repair the relationship that Black girls and other girls of color who have been involved in the juvenile-legal or foster care systems have with school.

2 Assist students with recovering and accumulating school credits toward completion of a high school diploma.

3 Facilitate girls' enrollment in institutions of higher learning and career-bound employment.

experiencing school violence such as bullying, harassment, property intrusion, serious physical intrusion, and threats.[4] And as born out in the data, these forms of school violence—especially sexual harassment and bullying by other students and adults—permeate the academic experiences of many Black girls.[5] Consequently, for many Black girls, schools are not bastions of safety and protection, but rather are sites of immense harm.

The violence that Black girls encounter in educational settings erodes their connection and attachment to school and their education. Exclusionary school discipline also weakens students' bonds with school.[6] Despite no evidence that Black girls' behavior is more problematic, disruptive, or threatening than their peers, Black girls are more often subjected to exclusionary discipline, such as suspensions and expulsions.[7] According to a report from Georgetown Law School's Center on Poverty and Inequality, Black girls were suspended from school 4.2 times, expelled from school 4 times, and arrested on school campuses 3.7 times more often than white girls.[8] When students' bonds with school are broken, they do not feel safe or believe that teachers or the administration treat them fairly or are invested in their success, and they do not perceive schools as places of support. Broken school bonds also diminish students' own personal investment in school and their beliefs in the importance of school and what they believe they can achieve academically.[9]

Consequently, Black girls—particularly those who are directly impacted by the juvenile legal system and foster care—are at heightened risk of disengaging from and being pushed out of school.[10] Court-involved youth and youth in foster care experience distressingly low rates of high school graduation. While some may attribute poor educational outcomes among these groups to their families and backgrounds, there is evidence that direct contact with these systems is responsible for the poor outcomes observed among these youth. Research shows that arrests and court involvement disrupt students educational trajectories, causing academic delays and students to leave school altogether and not pursue college degrees.[11]

Although the factors that contribute to school bonds and attachment are well-documented, many schools, especially schools serving predominantly Black youth and other youth of color, struggle to cultivate environments that support students' growth and development. The field also lacks empirical research examining strategies for repairing students' bonds with school after they have been severely weakened and even broken. Given that the educational attainment of students—and their overall wellbeing and success in adulthood—depends on forging strong attachment and commitment to school, it is vital that research deeply explores how to repair broken bonds with school, especially how to repair those bonds with system-impacted Black girls, like the students who attend EMERGE.

The Model

EMERGE consists of four main components:

1. Alameda County Office of Education independent study,[d]

2. Tailored instruction,

3. Individual case managing/life coaching, and

4. Transformative Mentoring™ and workshops.

These are the cornerstones of the model. These elements work together to repair students' connections with learning and academic achievement, as shown in the EMERGE Logic Model in Figure 1. EMERGE operates from the belief that preparing Black girls and other girls of color who have been involved in the juvenile-legal or foster care systems for educational and employment success requires also addressing their mental and emotional wellbeing—especially because many students are survivors of complex trauma, which will be discussed in a later section.[e] Therefore, EMERGE's

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d   Alameda County Office of Education, Independent Study, https://www.acoe.org/Page/2234.

e   Complex trauma is defined as children's exposure to multiple traumatic events and the long-term effects of those exposures. See the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, "Complex Trauma," https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/complex-trauma.

Figure 1: EMERGE Logic Model
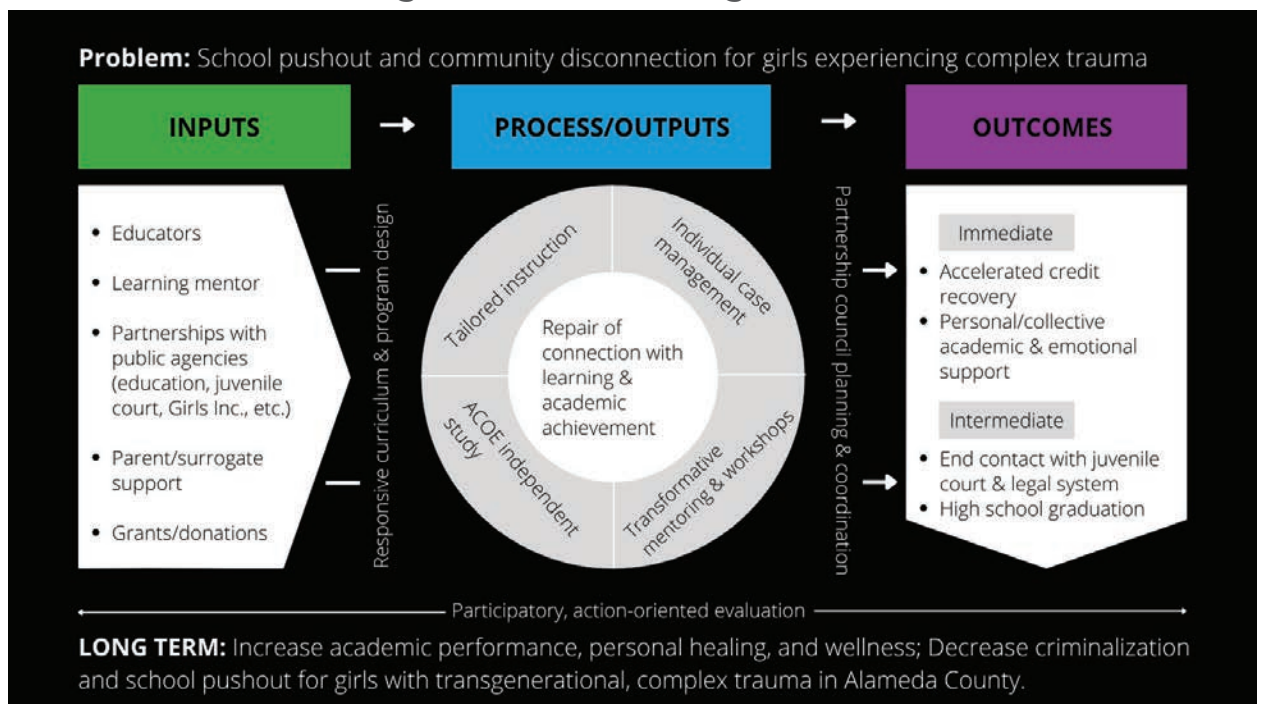
original program model integrated educational assistance and accelerated credit accrual with intensive mental wellness and crisis intervention services to create a learning environment organized around its students' specialized and complex needs.

Originally, the core members of the EMERGE team included the program director, lead instructor, learning mentor, case manager/life coach, licensed therapist, and the ACOE teacher of record. The roles of each member of the team are described below.

- **Program Director:** Oversaw management and implementation of the EMERGE program.

- **Lead Instructor:** Led curriculum development and primary in-classroom instruction.

- **Learning Mentor:** Operated as an in-classroom liaison for the students. Also often attended court proceedings on behalf of students, met with probation and supervision officers, and ensured transportation to EMERGE.

- **Case Manager/Life Coach:** Ensured that the girls completed coursework that would lead to high school completion, as well as met other requirements that were conditions of their probation.

- **Licensed Therapist:** Provided in-classroom support, mediated conflict, and provided a safe space for the girls to discuss activities affecting their personal education goals

- **ACOE Teacher of Record:** The Alameda County Office of Education teacher of record is not an employee of EMERGE, but of ACOE. They come to EMERGE at least once per week to assist students with their packet work and collect completed packets.[f]

In addition to the program staff who worked closely with students, EMERGE collaborated with other organizations in Alameda County to ensure that girls received gender-specific and culturally affirming youth development services to support their education and employment goals. Collaboration and partnership were key strategies that allowed EMERGE to provide services that students needed that were outside the scope of The Mentoring Center's areas of specialization.

When the program launched, it partnered with the Alameda County Office of Education (ACOE); Motivating, Inspiring, Supporting, and Serving Sexually Exploited Youth (MISSSEY); Girls Global Media; and Laney College, and the National Black Women's

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f   Packets as part of the Alameda County Office of Education's alternative education programs are discussed in a later section of this report.

Justice Institute (NBWJI) provided technical support and went on to conduct the process evaluation. Each of the original program partners filled a particular role, offering services that support girls' growth and development and are particularly difficult for Black girls who have been involved in the juvenile-legal or foster care systems to access. The ACOE and Laney College came on board to facilitate students' educational advancement and college matriculation. Laney College also originally provided the physical space where EMERGE operated. Girls Global Media offered media training and other related vocational services to prepare girls for employment. And MISSSEY provided mental health services and supports, as many of the girls in EMERGE were survivors of sexual violence, including sexual exploitation. As shown in the EMERGE logic model (see Figure 1), the EMERGE staff and its partners worked together to institute a curriculum and program model designed to put students on a path to long-term education and career success while being attentive to each girls' personal experiences and needs.

Evaluation Aims and Methodology

The aim of the process evaluation was to understand the implementation and evolution of EMERGE. Specifically, we sought to answer the following questions:

1. What strategies did EMERGE use to repair students' bonds with school and restore a commitment to their education?

2. What strategies did EMERGE use to build pathways to college and employment for the system-impacted girls it served?

3. How consistent was the implementation of the program to the original model and what factors resulted in changes to the original program design?

Therefore, the ultimate purpose of the evaluation was to describe and understand EMERGE's services, activities, policies, and procedures, as well as factors that affected its implementation. A process evaluation, such as this, is appropriate for pilot programs, such as EMERGE, because the program is in the early stages of the developmental process. Interventions typically undergo many changes over their life course, especially at the beginning. Program elements that may have made sense during the planning period may not be feasible in practice or in the particular setting in which the intervention is being implemented. Elements may work as effectively as hoped or not work at all. External forces may also lead to decisions to modify interventions, such as changes in local policy or discontinuation of key partnerships. All of these are common reasons why changes to a program's design may occur during the pilot period. A process evaluation is a structured way to review the implementation process and make sense of any alterations to a program's design, and it allows us to use what we learn to further refine and clarify an intervention's model to support the program in achieving its intended outcomes.

Data Collection and Analysis

This evaluation used a mixed methods approach. First, NBWJI researchers collected qualitative data consisting of observations of program activities and one-on-one interviews with students and staff.[g] We conducted the evaluation over a period of almost two

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g   Consent was obtained for participants, including parental consent for students under the age of 18. All program data were de-identified before being shared with researchers to protect the confidentiality of students enrolled in EMERGE.

years, from October 2018 to May 2020. The research team interviewed nine students, each completing one interview, and had many formal and informal conversations with program staff over the course of the evaluation. In addition, researchers observed program activities, from staff meetings to sessions with EMERGE students. Due to shifts in partnerships over time, which are described later in this report, researchers did not conduct interviews with any of the organizations that collaborated with EMERGE.

NBWJI researchers analyzed the qualitative data using inductive and deductive coding approaches: the inductive approach allowed researchers to identify codes, themes, and issues that emerged from the data, and the deductive approach helped us ascertain how certain key concepts that were determined critical to the model at its inception—such as "repairing bonds" and "trauma-informed"—manifested in the data that was collected. Both strategies are common analytical strategies deployed in qualitative research.

For the quantitative data, we collected student demographic and program data obtained by EMERGE. That data allowed us to create a demographic snapshot of the population of girls enrolled in EMERGE and how they were performing in school.

Findings

The key findings in this report help us answer the questions guiding the evaluation:

- What strategies did EMERGE use to repair students' bonds with school?

- How did EMERGE create pathways to college and employment?

- How does the program, as implemented, compare to the original plan?

Taken together, the results offer important insight into the values EMERGE upholds, how those values informed key decisions about program elements and activities, and the influence of external forces on the implementation of the program.

First, we begin our discussion of the findings by presenting the demographic characteristics and backgrounds of the students enrolled in EMERGE to better understand who the program served and what their needs were. Next, we examine the strategies that EMERGE used to rebuild students' connection to school and academic achievement. In particular, we explore how the concepts of trauma, gender-responsivity, and cultural affirmation informed which strategies were implemented. We also examine students' perceptions and reactions toward the strategies that were used. Finally, we discuss how EMERGE sought to build pathways to college and careers and the extent of that success and consider the role and impact of EMERGE's key partners.
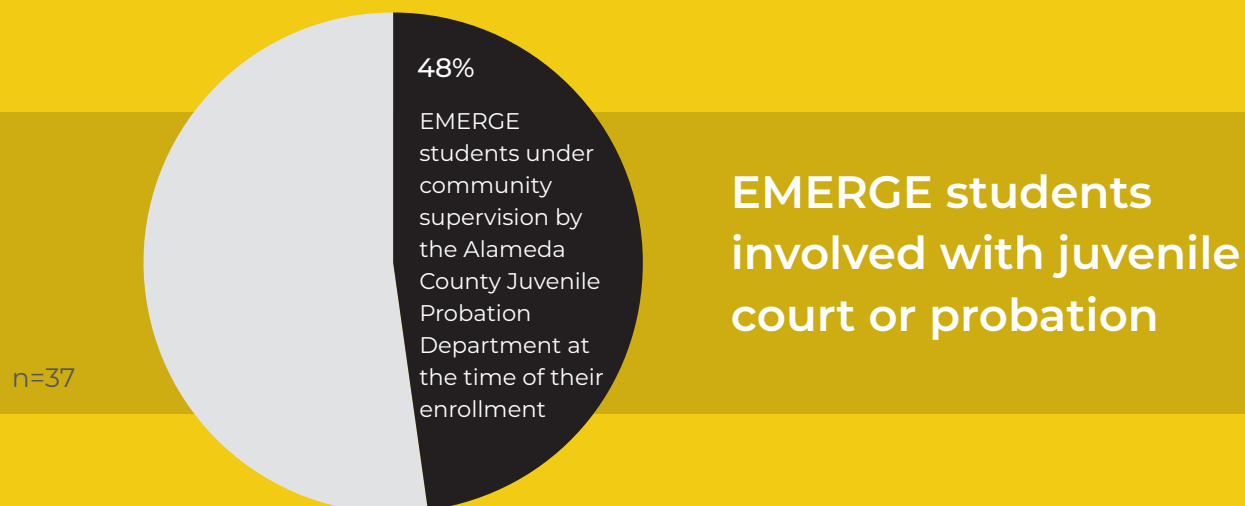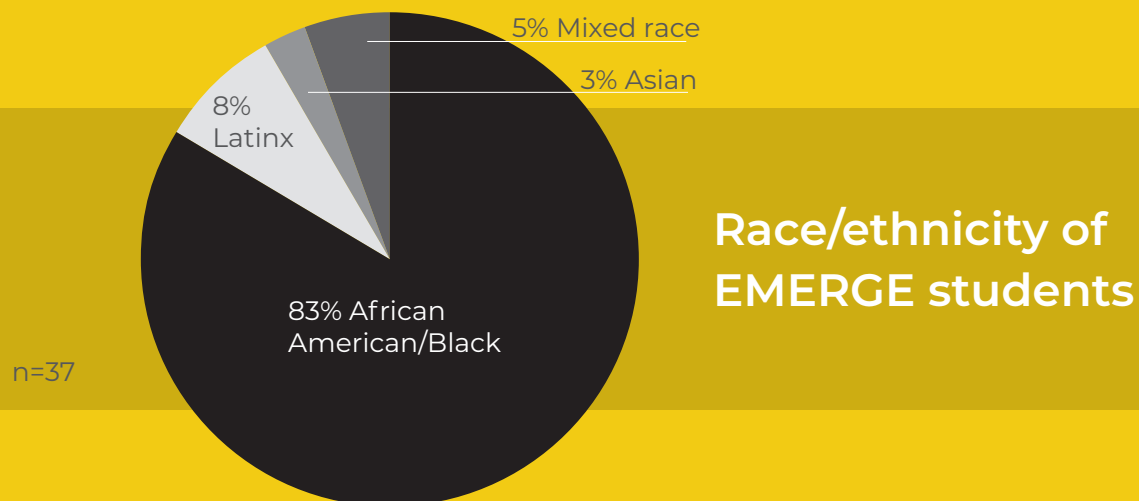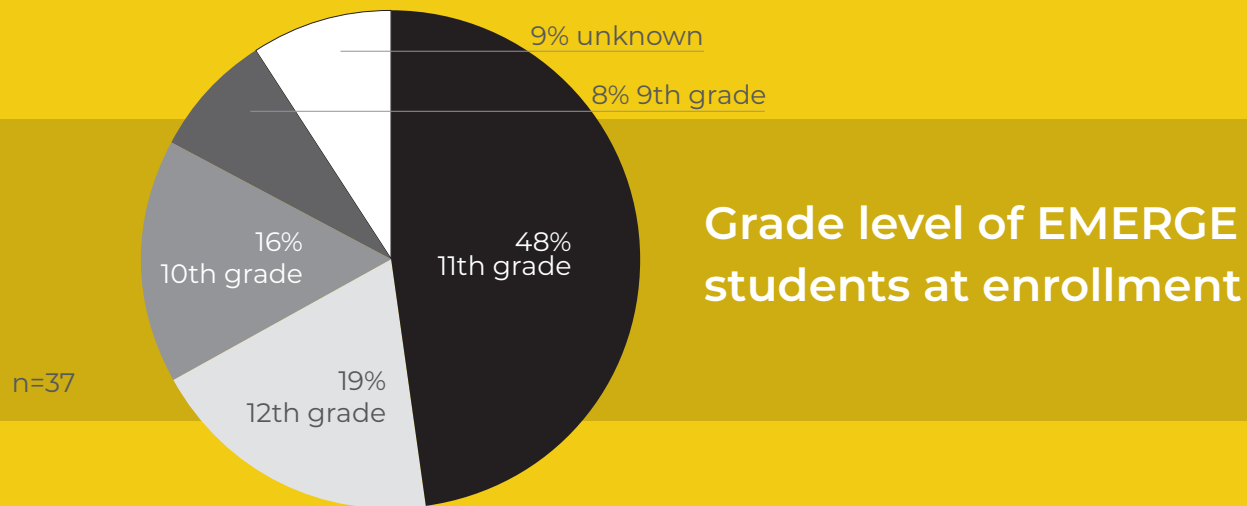
Who Attends EMERGE?

The girls enrolled in EMERGE were between 15 and 19 years old, with an average age of 16 years old. All of the students were youth of color, of whom the overwhelming majority identified as African American/Black: 31 out of the 37 girls (83%) who were enrolled or had completed the program at the time of the evaluation were Black. Of the remaining students, three identified as Latinx, one identified as Asian, and two identified as mixed race. Most of the girls in EMERGE lived with a parent or caregiver (24, 65%); additionally, three students were living with someone other than a permanent caregiver, such as a family member or a foster parent, and three were unhoused, according to the program intake data.[h]

The data also showed that many of the students in EMERGE had direct involvement with the juvenile court or probation. Nearly half (48%) of the girls who participated in EMERGE were under community supervision by the Alameda County Juvenile Pro-

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h   Data regarding students' living situation at intake was not available for all students.

Who Attends EMERGE

Grade level of EMERGE students at enrollment

9% unknown

8% 9th grade

48% 11th grade

19% 12th grade

16% 10th grade

n=37

Race/ethnicity of EMERGE students

5% Mixed race

3% Asian

8% Latinx

83% African American/Black

n=37

EMERGE students involved with juvenile court or probation

48% EMERGE students under community supervision by the Alameda County Juvenile Probation Department at the time of their enrollment

n=37

bation Department at the time of their enrollment. Juvenile probation was a leading referral source for EMERGE, referring 13 girls to the program. Other referral sources included the Alameda County school district (referring four students), and parent/guardians (referring one student).[i] NBWJI researchers also heard in interviews with staff that students were referred to EMERGE by word of mouth. In a few instances, EMERGE enrolled the siblings of students who were already enrolled in the program, as they were experiencing similar challenges at school and at home.

In addition to information captured at intake, interviews with staff and youth revealed that many EMERGE students had been exposed to potentially traumatic life events. Although the program data showed that most youth in EMERGE lived with a parent or guardian, many also were children of incarcerated adults, and some had siblings who were incarcerated. Because of their living situations, girls in EMERGE also assumed caregiving responsibilities, especially those who were parents or had young siblings in the same household. With many of their families living in poverty, some students had to work to financially support loved ones. When possible, EMERGE staff provided students with financial help, such as transportation assistance to and from the program, to help mitigate financial burdens. Many students in EMERGE were also survivors of sexual violence, including sex trafficking and exploitation. Overall, the students enrolled in EMERGE had experienced several adverse childhood experiences and were forced to shoulder substantial responsibility in their households.

At the time of enrollment, almost half of students (48%) were in 11th grade, 19% were in 12th grade, 16% were in 10th grade, and 8% were in 9th grade. Five students had special education needs. Before attending EMERGE, many of the girls enrolled in the program struggled academically and were not on a path to graduate from high school. Students' grade point averages (GPA) ranged widely, from 0.11 to 3.4. The average student GPA was 1.32, which is equivalent to a D letter grade.[j] Before starting at EMERGE, attendance was also a major challenge for 16% of students. Attendance reports for 14 students showed excessive absences. Six students missed more than 20 days of school in an academic year. According to the Alameda County District Attorney's Office, these students were considered chronically absent, which is defined as missing more than 10% of the school year (approximately 18 missed school days).[k] Research shows that as the number of school absences increases so does a student's risk of not graduating on time or at all.[12] One student missed 70 days of school during the school year before she enrolled at EMERGE, according to her attendance report.

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i   Intake data was not available for all students.

j   Grade data at intake was not available for all students.

k   "Alameda County District Attorney's Truancy & Attendance Program," September 2018, https://atschool.alcoda.org/files/2018-2019_Truancy_Handbook_c.pdf.

Additionally, several girls enrolled in EMERGE had been subjected to exclusionary discipline practices at their previous schools. Seven girls had been suspended, and two of them were also expelled. The most common reasons cited for their suspension were causing, attempting, or threatening injury; willful use of force or violence; phone use in school; disrupting class; defying authority; and theft of property. Thus, the data demonstrate that the schools the girls attended before EMERGE failed to meaningfully engage them and foster students' commitment to their educational advancement.

Strategies for Repairing Students' Connection to School

The strategies EMERGE used to repair students' connection with school and to restore their commitment to their education centered around making the program a space

where girls felt physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe. To do that, EMERGE instituted trauma-informed, gender-responsive, and culturally affirming policies, assessments, and program activities that helped educators better understand students' needs and experiences and allowed students to feel in control of the educational environment. These strategies not only reflected the program's educational values, but they also sought to forge strong student-educator relationships, helping to shift students' attitudes and perceptions about school and their ability to achieve academic success.

Assessing for Trauma

In 2017, EMERGE began administering the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) survey to students. The EMERGE team determined that it was important to assess students' exposure to potentially traumatic experiences, as literature has shown trauma exposure has negative effects on many aspects of a person's life, including academic performance.[13] The ACE assessment tool is validated and widely used for assessing the kind and magnitude of a person's experiences of trauma before the age of 17. The tool assesses for a wide range of possible traumatic events occurring during a person's childhood, such as experiences of physical, verbal, and sexual abuse and neglect, and other sources of trauma, including parental substance abuse and parental incarceration. Higher scores indicate exposure to multiple traumatic events, which the field of psychology considers complex trauma because people have had repeated or prolonged trauma exposure.[l]

"It's different here. We talk about Black women that were part of our history, and our quote of the day is always from a brown or Black woman. I want kids talking about my quotes one day." —EMERGE student

According to interviews with staff, most students at EMERGE were living with complex trauma, as many students had scores of four or higher, out of a possible score of 10. Research shows that the risk of poor outcomes—in all areas of life including edu-

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l   Complex trauma is defined as children's exposure to multiple traumatic events and the long-term effects of those exposures. See the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, "Complex Trauma," https://www.nctsn. org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/complex-trauma.

cation, employment, and health—increases as a person's trauma exposure increases, with significantly heightened risk for people with scores of 4 and higher.[14] Compared to people with no trauma exposure during childhood, people reporting scores of 4 or more were at 4 to 12 times greater risk for alcoholism, drug use, and suicide attempts.[15]

Although EMERGE is an educational program, the staff understood—and the ACE scores confirmed—that the program needed to assume a holistic approach that also sought to help students heal from their past experiences of trauma. **EMERGE staff used the information from the ACE assessment tool to better understand their students and to be able to tailor services to youth to help them meet their educational goals and create an environment where all youth in the program could thrive.**

Building Trusting Relationships

Because many of their students were struggling with complex trauma, the EMERGE staff prioritized building trusting relationships with the girls in the program. And students noticed. The trustworthiness of staff was a recurring theme in student interviews. Nearly every student interviewed described feeling accepted and understood by the EMERGE team. **Students reported that they could express themselves without fear of judgment or consequences for honestly communicating how they felt. They also expressed feeling comfortable and relaxed at EMERGE because staff understood them and what they were going through,** without requiring students to disclose all of the details of their lives.

Student descriptions of EMERGE were starkly different from their descriptions of the schools they previously attended. At the other schools, students reported that there were no trusted adults they could connect to or whom they believed they could be open with or rely on for help. At EMERGE, however, students felt a sense of kinship with EMERGE's team because they came from similar backgrounds. This established a strong foundation for trust between educators and students that permeated the entire program, including the relationships and connection between EMERGE students.

There was a notable difference in how students related to the staff who, like them, were Black women and from the same neighborhoods, compared to how they responded to people who collaborated with EMERGE whose backgrounds were different. When EMERGE launched, Girls Global Media (GGM) agreed to provide media training and other vocational services to students. The collaboration stalled early on because the students did not connect with the person who facilitated the programming. Staff observed a culture clash that they believed made students reluctant to participate in the activities. Ultimately, the partnership dissolved, partly due to GGM's limited

capacity and also due to lack of student engagement. **That experience affirmed the importance of hiring staff who were from the same communities as EMERGE students and collaborating with organizations with a deep understanding of the lived experiences of the youth EMERGE serves; they found that this was vital to students' sense of safety and comfort in the program.**

Creating Safe Spaces

The physical design and program format also played an important role in making students feel safe at EMERGE. The EMERGE team wanted the physical space to feel inviting and reflect their commitment to uplift students. Since its launch, EMERGE has operated out of two locations, both of which were adorned with posters quoting Black women and other women of color leaders to remind the students of what they can achieve and to stoke their aspirations and personal goals. **As intended, the decor and how the educators intentionally engaged with the culturally affirming images in the space helped to inspire students and allow them to reimagine new possibilities for themselves.** When describing EMERGE, one student said, "It's different here. We talk about Black women that were part of our history, and our quote of the day is always from a brown or Black woman. I want kids talking about my quotes one day."

In addition to being inspirational, the EMERGE team sought to make the program a place where students could reclaim their agency. This was important given the number of students who had experienced complex trauma, as loss of control is a common feeling among trauma survivors. One of the first ways EMERGE helped students reclaim a sense of personal sovereignty was by allowing them to sit anywhere in the building when working on independent assignments. They could complete assignments inside or outside the classroom, in groups or alone. They could even sit on the floor if they wanted. EMERGE gave students license to learn in whatever space felt most comfortable to them that day. **Students appreciated this versatility and freedom; students reported that being allowed to make decisions that they felt were best for them at that moment made them feel understood and supported.**

Students were also invited to assist with some high-level programmatic decisions. Because it was important for students to feel connected to staff, girls in the program were asked to assist in interviews for job candidates. Two students were also part of the committee that developed EMERGE's dress code. **Opportunities like these not only helped students establish a sense of control over the learning environment, but they also allowed students to develop a sense of self-determination and leadership.**

Prioritizing Restoration, Not Punishment

K-12 public schools overly rely on punitive discipline, such as suspensions and expulsion, to address student behavior they consider disruptive or unsafe. These responses disproportionately target and disrupt the educational attainment of Black girls.[16] Given that, EMERGE implemented restorative responses instead of punishment. For example, when students violated the dress code, EMERGE staff never chastised students. **In contrast, they approached the situation positively and with an openness to hearing any frustrations students might have with the policy.** And rather than send girls home, which is a common response to dress code violations, EMERGE asked students to cover up and offered a jacket if they did not have anything else to wear.

"I come [to EMERGE] because I'm going to graduate, like I'm really going to graduate, so I gotta come." —EMERGE student

When there were incidents between students, EMERGE used restorative circles to create a space where students could safely communicate their issues and concerns.[17] **The intent was not to blame any one person, but instead for girls to collectively resolve the conflict by acknowledging the harm and making amends to each other and the school community as a whole.** In interviews, students reported how much they appreciated and valued these opportunities to share their feelings and be heard by their classmates, especially during difficult times. They expressed disappointment when the restorative circles stopped because of the departure of the licensed therapist who facilitated them.

Building Education and Career Pathways

To create pathways to higher education and viable careers, EMERGE adopted a student-centered approach. The program took into account each student's learning style and allowed them to pursue their educational goals in a self-paced manner. Although students successfully accrued course credits, college matriculation and securing career-bound employment remained a challenge for many of the youth in the program.

Understanding Perceived Barriers to Academic Achievement

Before they start the program, EMERGE students complete an assessment that asks about their preferred learning styles and education goals. In addition to helping instructors determine whether a student is an auditory or visual learner, the assessment tool helped instructors pinpoint any perceived barriers or limiting beliefs students may have about their ability to achieve academic success. Even though all students reported a strong desire to graduate high school, they also noted several obstacles and concerns, such as insufficient course credits, lack of familial support, and frustration with teaching styles at previous schools. They echoed these sentiments in interviews with NBWJI. With this information, EMERGE instructors devised a course of study and developed a school culture to instill in students confidence and excitement for the future. **By implementing the student assessment, EMERGE instructors were able to design a course of study that was cognizant of and responsive to student's needs, and helped them to address some of the real and perceived barriers students faced.**

Self-Paced, Individualized Course Study

EMERGE is one of several alternative education programs for youth who are directly impacted by the juvenile legal system that is credentialed by the Alameda County Office of Education (ACOE). And it is the only one for system-impacted girls.

The ACOE requires that all of its alternative education programs use course packets as the primary mode of teaching students. Students are assigned packets in accordance with the coursework they need to complete to graduate. Each packet includes the key lessons and activities students are expected to complete for a given topic. Students accrue course credits as they complete packets. Because each student has an education plan designed just for them, often students are working independently on different course packets. **The benefit of the course packet model is that it allows students to have a customized education plan that allows them to accrue missing course credits at their own pace and often faster than could occur in a traditional public school.**

Program staff observed that students were more likely to attend the program on days when the ACOE teacher of record was present because the teacher grades packets on site. EMERGE developed supplemental lessons on a range of topics to encourage students to attend other days of the week, but this had limited success because the supplemental coursework was not required for graduation, nor did it address any of the content of the course packets.
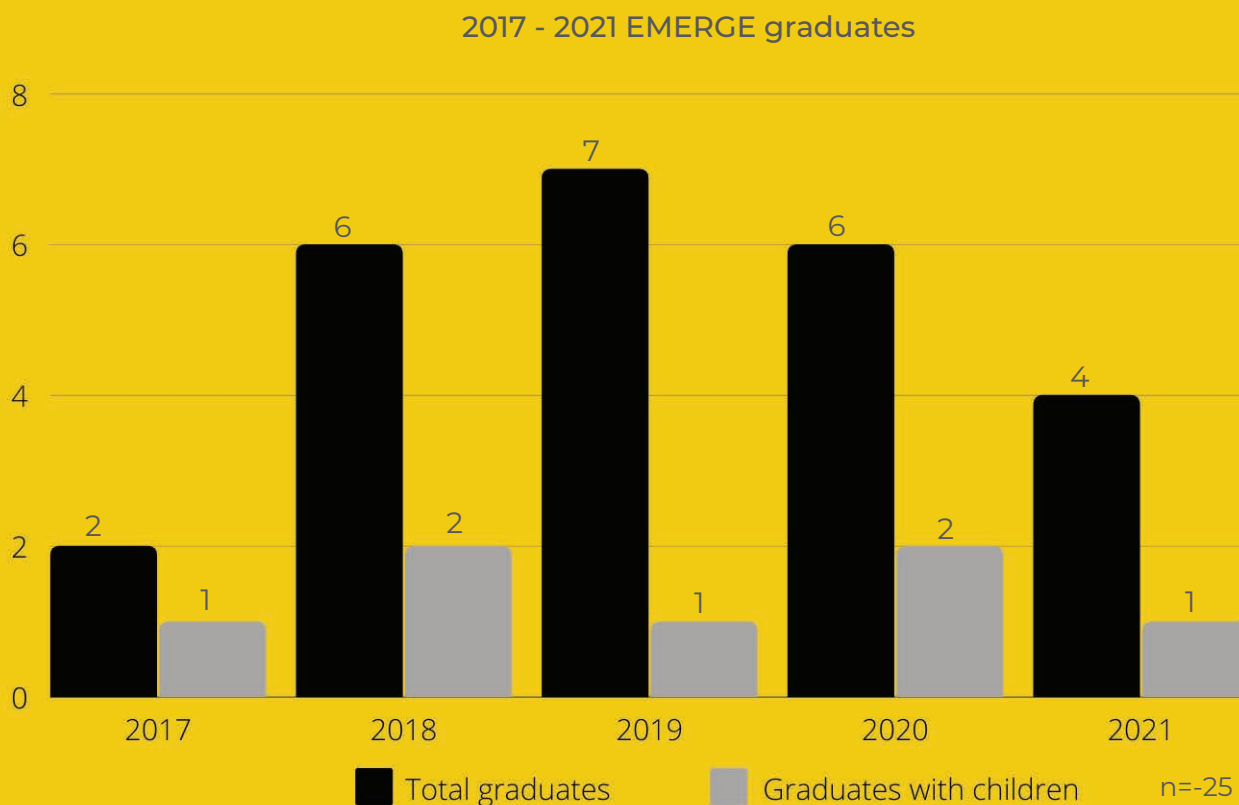
EMERGE initially sought to develop a supplemental curriculum but found that was difficult because students' packets were covering different topics. Although the individualized course of study helped students accrue the credits they needed to graduate, EMERGE staff questioned whether the model fostered an enthusiasm for learning or a desire for higher education. Despite challenges, EMERGE leadership remains committed to creating a culturally affirming, supplemental curriculum, which they believe is an important next step in the development and evolution of the program model.

Challenges Creating Pathways to College and Careers

Since EMERGE first opened, 25 students have graduated, of which 7 were or became mothers during enrollment. Sixty-eight percent of girls graduated from the program.[m] As one student told us, "I come [to EMERGE] because I'm going to graduate, like I'm really going to graduate, so I gotta come." Although EMERGE has built student confidence, successfully graduated youth from the program, and helped students earn high school diplomas, only two students have gone on to matriculate

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m   Not every student who did not complete EMERGE left school altogether; some returned to their previous schools, and others moved out of the area.

2017 - 2021 EMERGE graduates

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total graduates	2	6	7	6	4
Graduates with children	1	2	1	2	1

■ Total graduates   ■ Graduates with children   n=-25

college: One student is pursuing an associate's degree at a two-year college and the other is working toward her bachelor's degree at a four-year institution.

College matriculation has proven more difficult for EMERGE graduates than anticipated. When EMERGE first started, Laney College provided the physical space for the program, and it was presumed that EMERGE students would get college exposure by enrolling in courses there. However, that relationship dissolved at the start of the 2017-2018 school year due to funding constraints and changes in leadership at Laney College. As a result, EMERGE relocated and the relationship between the organizations dissolved, dismantling the pipeline to Laney College for students that EMERGE hoped to create. The cessation of the partnership with Laney College was a major disruption to EMERGE's original plan and strategy for building education pathways for the girls in the program. At the time of the evaluation, only one student had enrolled in coursework at a local community college while attending EMERGE. Because of other significant changes that occurred during the pilot, which we will discuss in the next section, the program was not able to establish new partnerships that could help it facilitate student matriculation to higher education or paths to career-bound employment as planned.

Managing Change

EMERGE experienced a number of changes during the pilot period that resulted in the program operating differently than originally planned. When the program began, EMERGE partnered with 1) Laney College, which provided physical space and an opportunity to build a pipeline to college for students, 2) Girls Global Media for vocational training, and 3) MISSSEY for support providing restorative circles and training for staff on working with survivors of sex trafficking. But none of those relationships persisted beyond the first two years of EMERGE's operation. EMERGE also experienced difficulty identifying staff who were suited to support the complex needs of the girls enrolled in the program. Both of these factors significantly affected program operations, causing EMERGE to adapt in response to external factors beyond its control.

Partnerships

Organizational partnerships were a cornerstone of EMERGE's original model. Recognizing that EMERGE students needed support beyond the scope of The Mentoring Center's expertise, the program turned to other organizations to fill important service gaps. The cessation of these partnerships created challenges for EMERGE, including preventing it from operating certain elements of the model.

For example, when EMERGE lost the therapist from MISSSEY, the program could no longer provide counseling or facilitate restorative circles for students, which were both instituted as part of the model to address students' complex trauma. When Laney College could no longer provide space for EMERGE, the program could not as easily expose students to the college, as originally planned. In addition, loss of the space temporarily displaced EMERGE and forced the program to relocate to a local community center, which staff reported negatively affected student engagement. Laney College was easily accessible by public transit, but the new location was not. Also, EMERGE could not make the new site as welcoming as the space at Laney College. According to staff, it felt "transitional," which contributed to students' disinterest in attending programming.

In April 2018, nearly 10 months after leaving Laney College, EMERGE relocated to Girls Inc., a community-based organization in Alameda County that connects girls from underserved communities with resources and opportunities that help them navigate gender, economic and racial barriers. Although the partnership with Girls Inc. allowed EMERGE to recommence services in a "beautiful and inviting" space, EMERGE still has not identified a new partner to repave the pathway to college made possible by Laney College. A relationship of that kind has been more difficult to recreate because of the time, attention, and levels of bureaucracy needed to formalize a partnership.

Staffing

On top of challenges with program partners, EMERGE also experienced challenges fully staffing the program, a common issue for organizations serving vulnerable populations. In the beginning, the model called for a program director, lead instructor, learning mentor, case manager/life coach, licensed therapist, and a teacher of record certified by the ACOE. However, in year two, EMERGE lost two key staff: the licensed therapist and the lead instructor. Without the therapist, EMERGE did not have the same capacity to address students' mental health needs; in addition, the loss of the lead instructor prevented the program from developing the supplemental curriculum intended as an enhancement to the individualized coursework students completed toward graduation. Both roles were critical to the model, and losing them impeded implementation of important elements of the model.

For a long time, EMERGE found it difficult to fill these roles. Four people have held the lead instructor role since the program launched. At first, EMERGE had intended to fill the role with a person who was a credentialed teacher and had experience working with Black girls who were directly impacted by the juvenile-legal or foster care systems. Past experience working with EMERGE's student population was particularly important. **They learned from past experience that people who were unfa-**

miliar with the populations of girls they served often struggled to address the emotional needs of students and were more susceptible to vicarious trauma[n] and subsequent burnout. They had difficulty finding people with this specific combination of skills and experience. In 2019, the program promoted the learning mentor into the position. Although she was not a credentialed teacher, her extensive teaching experience and work with the EMERGE program more than prepared her for the role, and the students agreed.

During the second year of operation, EMERGE leadership determined that they needed to bring on another staff person to support the students, particularly with connecting students to other services and resources. Consequently, they created the outreach coordinator position, which is responsible for referring students to housing programs, helping them find primary medical care providers, and providing financial support for transportation assistance. They even work closely with the juvenile court to increase referrals to the program. **By establishing this role, EMERGE strengthened its capacity to help EMERGE students find stability and wellness in other parts of their lives.**

Conclusion

The EMERGE program offers insightful guidance for how to rebuild and repair students' bonds and attachment to school, especially for Black girls and other girls of color who are directly impacted by the juvenile-legal or foster care systems. Because of the distrust that students, like the girls enrolled in EMERGE, have of traditional educational settings, EMERGE's intentional strategy of integrating gender-responsive, culturally-affirming, and trauma-informed frameworks and practices into the program's core structure proved to be key to students' success. The cornerstone of EMERGE's approach was to foster an environment where students knew the staff were wholly invested in their wellbeing and would accept them no matter the circumstance or behavior they exhibited. In doing this, EMERGE helped revitalize students' commitment to their education and confidence in themselves and what they could achieve.

Because of this approach, EMERGE should be viewed not only as a school, but also as a critical support system for Black girls and other girls of color who have been impacted by the juvenile-legal or foster care systems. Many of these girls have been exposed

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n   The Office for Victims of Crime defines vicarious trauma as "work-related trauma exposure" from supporting victims and survivors violence, crime, and traumatic events. Office for Victims of Crime, "What is Vicarious Trauma?" https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/vtt/what-is-vicarious-trauma.

to adverse childhood experiences and are living with complex trauma and familial instability. A school environment that acknowledges these experiences and seeks to carefully and thoughtfully help students address their needs can go a long way toward repairing bonds to school—and ultimately lead to better overall long-term outcomes for students.

EMERGE looks and operates differently today than originally planned. The staffing is different, as well as the make-up of its program partners. Many of the changes occurred because relationships with program partners ended due to forces beyond The Mentoring Center's control. The dissolution of these partnerships had an outsized impact on the program that no one anticipated. Nevertheless, EMERGE persisted. Despite the challenges, the program and staff continued to help students achieve their educational and professional goals, as well as supported students' healing and well-being. EMERGE has successfully graduated girls from the program every year since its launch, despite experiencing considerable obstacles along the way. This is a significant feat, especially considering the extensive support EMERGE students need. With strong, stable partnerships, EMERGE can expect considerable improvements in all areas of program operation, including connecting more students to college and creating more pathways to employment and long-term stability and success.

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About NBWJI

At the National Black Women's Justice Institute, we research, elevate, and educate the public about innovative, community-led solutions to address the criminalization of Black women and girls. We aim to dismantle the racist and patriarchal U.S. criminal-legal system and build, in its place, pathways to opportunity and healing.

We envision a society that respects, values, and honors the humanity of Black women and girls, takes accountability for the harm it has inflicted, and recognizes that **real justice is healing.**

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